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Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer
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Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt
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Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy
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Chamberlain Langbein Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates
Brentano Claudius Schiller Bellamy Schilling Kralik Raabe Gibbon Tschchow
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gleim Vulpius
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Morgenstern Goedicke
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Mörike Musil
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Kraus
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus
Navarra Aurel Musset Lamprecht Kind Kirchhoff Hugo Moltke
Nestroy Marie de France
Nietzsche Nansen Laotse Ipsen Liebknecht
Marx Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz Ringelntz
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**Lord Ormont and His Aminta —
Volume 4**

George Meredith

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CHAPTER XVII

LADY CHARLOTTE'S TRIUMPH

One of the days of sovereign splendour in England was riding down the heavens, and drawing the royal mantle of the gold-fringed shadows over plain and wavy turf, blue water and woods of the country round Steignton. A white mansion shone to a length of oblong lake that held the sun-ball suffused in mild yellow.

'There's the place,' Lady Charlotte said to Weyburn, as they had view of it at a turn of the park. She said to herself—where I was born and bred! and her sight gloated momentarily on the house and side avenues, a great plane standing to the right of the house, the sparkle of a little river running near; all the scenes she knew, all young and lively. She sprang on her seat for a horse beneath her, and said, 'But this is healthy excitement,' as in reply to her London physician's remonstrances. 'And there's my brother Rowsley, talking to one of the keepers,' she cried. 'You see Lord Ormont? I can see a mile. Sight doesn't fail with me. He 's insisting. 'Ware poachers when Rowsley's on his ground! You smell the air here? Nobody dies round about Steignton. Their legs wear out and they lie down to rest them. It 's the finest air in the world. Now look, the third window left of the porch, first floor. That was my room before I married. Strangers have been here and called the place home. It can never be home to any but me and Rowsley. He sees the carriage. He little thinks! He's dressed in his white corduroy and knee-breeches. Age! he won't know age till he's ninety. Here he comes marching. He can't bear surprises. I'll wave my hand and call.'

She called his name.

In a few strides he was at the carriage window. 'You, Charlotte?'

'Home again, Rowsley! Bring down your eyebrows, and let me hear you're glad I 've come.'

'What made you expect you would find me here?'

'Anything-cats on the tiles at night. You can't keep a secret from me. Here's Mr. Weyburn, good enough to be my escort. I'll get out.'

She alighted, scorning help; Weyburn at her heels. The earl nodded to him politely and not cordially. He was hardly cordial to Lady Charlotte.

That had no effect on her. 'A glorious day for Steignton,' she said. 'Ah, there's the Buridon group of beeches; grander trees than grow at Buridon. Old timber now. I knew them slim as demoiselles. Where 's the ash? We had a splendid ash on the west side.'

'Dead and cut down long since,' replied the earl.

'So we go!'

She bent her steps to the spot: a grass-covered heave of the soil.

'Dear old tree!' she said, in a music of elegy: and to Weyburn: 'Looks like a stump of an arm lopped off a shoulder in bandages. Nature does it so. All the tenants doing well, Rowsley?'

'About the same amount of trouble with them.'

'Ours at Olmer get worse.'

'It's a process for the extirpation of the landlords.'

'Then down goes the country.'

'They 've got their case, their papers tell us.'

'I know they have; but we've got the soil, and we'll make a fight of it.'

'They can fight too, they say.'

'I should be sorry to think they couldn't if they're Englishmen.'

She spoke so like his old Charlotte of the younger days that her brother partly laughed.

'Parliamentary fighting 's not much to your taste or mine. They 've lost their stomach for any other. The battle they enjoy is the battle that goes for the majority. Gauge their valour by that.'

'To be sure,' said his responsive sister. She changed her note. 'But what I say is, let the nobles keep together and stick to their class. There's nothing to fear then. They must marry among themselves, think of the blood: it's their first duty. Or better a peasant girl! Middle courses dilute it to the stuff in a publican's tankard. It 's an adulterous beast who thinks of mixing old wine with anything.'

'Hulloa!' said the earl; and she drew up.

'You'll have me here till over to-morrow, Rowsley, so that I may have one clear day at Steignton?'

He bowed. 'You will choose your room. Mr. Weyburn is welcome.'

Weyburn stated the purport of his visit, and was allowed to name an early day for the end of his term of service.

Entering the house, Lady Charlotte glanced at the armour and stag branches decorating corners of the hall, and straightway laid her head forward, pushing after it in the direction of the drawing room. She went in, stood for a minute, and came out. Her mouth was hard shut.

At dinner she had tales of uxorious men, of men who married mistresses, of the fearful incubus the vulgar family of a woman of the inferior classes ever must be; and her animadversions were strong in the matter of gew-gaw modern furniture. The earl submitted to hear.

She was, however, keenly attentive whenever he proffered any item of information touching Steignton. After dinner Weyburn strolled to the points of view she cited as excellent for different aspects of her old home.

He found her waiting to hear his laudation when he came back; and in the early morning she was on the terrace, impatient to lead him down to the lake. There, at the boat-house, she commanded him to loosen a skiff and give her a paddle. Between exclamations, designed to waken louder from him, and not so successful as her

cormorant hunger for praise of Steignton required, she plied him to confirm with his opinion an opinion that her reasoning mind had almost formed in the close neighbourhood of the beloved and honoured person providing it; for abstract ideas were unknown to her. She put it, however, as in the abstract:—

'How is it we meet people brave as lions before an enemy, and rank cowards where there's a botheration among their friends at home? And tell me, too, if you've thought the thing over, what's the meaning of this? I've met men in high places, and they've risen to distinction by their own efforts, and they head the nation. Right enough, you'd say. Well, I talk with them, and I find they've left their brains on the ladder that led them up; they've only the ideas of their grandfather on general subjects. I come across a common peasant or craftsman, and he down there has a mind more open—he's wiser in his intelligence than his rulers and lawgivers up above him. He understands what I say, and I learn from him. I don't learn much from our senators, or great lawyers, great doctors, professors, members of governing bodies—that lot. Policy seems to petrify their minds when they've got on an eminence. Now explain it, if you can.'

'Responsibility has a certain effect on them, no doubt,' said Weyburn. 'Eminent station among men doesn't give a larger outlook. Most of them confine their observation to their supports. It happens to be one of the questions I have thought over. Here in England, and particularly on a fortnight's run in the lowlands of Scotland once, I have, like you, my lady, come now and then across the people we call common, men and women, old wayside men especially; slow-minded, but hard in their grasp of facts, and ready to learn, and logical, large in their ideas, though going a roundabout way to express them. They were at the bottom of wisdom, for they had in their heads the delicate sense of justice, upon which wisdom is founded. That is what their rulers lack. Unless we have the sense of justice abroad like a common air, there 's no peace, and no steady advance. But these humble people had it. They reasoned from it, and came to sound conclusions. I felt them to be my superiors. On the other hand, I have not felt the same with "our senators, rulers, and lawgivers." They are for the most part deficient in the liberal mind.'

'Ha! good, so far. How do you account for it?' said Lady Charlotte.

'I read it in this way: that the world being such as it is at present, demanding and rewarding with honours and pay special services, the men called great, who have risen to distinction, are not men of brains, but the men of aptitudes. These men of aptitudes have a poor conception of the facts of life to meet the necessities of modern expansion. They are serviceable in departments. They go as they are driven, or they resist. In either case, they explain how it is that we have a world moving so sluggishly. They are not the men of brains, the men of insight and outlook. Often enough they are foes of the men of brains.'

'Aptitudes; yes, that flashes a light into me,' said Lady Charlotte. 'I see it better. It helps to some comprehension of their muddle. A man may be a first-rate soldier, doctor, banker—as we call the user now-a-days—or brewer, orator, anything that leads up to a figure-head, and prove a foolish fellow if you sound him. I 've thought something like it, but wanted the word. They say themselves, "Get to know, and you see with what little wisdom the world is governed!" You explain how it is. I shall carry "aptitudes" away.'

She looked straight at Weyburn. 'If I were a younger woman I could kiss you for it.'

He bowed to her very gratefully.

'Remember, my lady, there's a good deal of the Reformer in that definition.'

'I stick to my class. But they shall hear a true word when there's one abroad, I can tell them. That reminds me—you ought to have asked; let me tell you I'm friendly with the Rev. Mr. Hampton-Evey. We had a wrestle for half an hour, and I threw him and helped him up, and he apologized for tumbling, and I subscribed to one of his charities, and gave up about the pew, but had an excuse for not sitting under the sermon. A poor good creature. He 's got the aptitudes for his office. He won't do much to save his Church. I knew another who had his aptitude for the classics, and he has mounted. He was my tutor when I was a girl. He was fond of declaiming passages from Lucian and Longus and Ovid. One day he was at it with

a piece out of Daphnis and Chloe, and I said, "Now translate." He fetched a gurgle to say he couldn't, and I slapped his check. Will you believe it? the man was indignant. I told him, if he would like to know why I behaved in "that unmaidenly way," he had better apply at home. I had no further intimations of his classical aptitudes; but he took me for a cleverer pupil than I was. I hadn't a notion of the stuff he recited. I read by his face. That was my aptitude—always has been. But think of the donkeys parents are when they let a man have a chance of pouring his barley-sugar and sulphur into the ears of a girl. Lots of girls have no latent heckles and prickles to match his villany. —There's my brother come back to breakfast from a round. You and I 'll have a drive before lunch, and a ride or a stroll in the afternoon. There's a lot to see. I mean you to get the whole place into your head. I 've ordered the phaeton, and you shall take the whip, with me beside you. That's how my husband and I spent three-quarters of our honeymoon.'

Each of the three breakfasted alone.

They met on the terrace. It was easily perceived that Lord Ormont stood expecting an assault at any instant; prepared also to encounter and do battle with his redoubtable sister. Only he wished to defer the engagement. And he was magnanimous: he was in the right, she in the wrong; he had no desire to grapple with her, fling and humiliate. The Sphinx of Mrs. Pagnell had been communing with himself unwontedly during the recent weeks.

What was the riddle of him? That, he did not read. But, expecting an assault, and relieved by his sister Charlotte's departure with Weyburn, he went to the drawing-room, where he had seen her sniff her strong suspicions of a lady coming to throne it. Charlotte could believe that he flouted the world with a beautiful young woman on his arm; she would not believe him capable of doing that in his family home and native county; so, then, her shrewd wits had nothing or little to learn. But her vehement fighting against facts; her obstinate aristocratic prejudices, which he shared; her stinger of a tongue: these in ebullition formed a discomfiting prospect. The battle might as well be conducted through the post. Come it must!

Even her writing of the pointed truths she would deliver was an unpleasant anticipation. His ears heated. Undoubtedly he could

crush her. Yet, supposing her to speak to his ears, she would say: 'You married a young woman, and have been foiling and fooling her ever since, giving her half a title to the name of wife, and allowing her in consequence to be wholly disfigured before the world—your family naturally her chief enemies, who would otherwise (Charlotte would proclaim it) have been her friends. What! your intention was (one could hear Charlotte's voice) to smack the world in the face, and you smacked your young wife's instead!'

His intention had been nothing of the sort. He had married, in a foreign city, a young woman who adored him, whose features, manners, and carriage of her person satisfied his exacting taste in the sex; and he had intended to cast gossipy England over the rail and be a traveller for the remainder of his days. And at the first she had acquiesced, tacitly accepted it as part of the contract. He bore with the burden of an intolerable aunt of hers for her sake. The two fell to work to conspire. Aminta 'tired of travelling,' Aminta must have a London house. She continually expressed a hope that 'she might set her eyes on Steignton some early day.' In fact, she as good as confessed her scheme to plot for the acknowledged position of Countess of Ormont in the English social world. That was a distinct breach of the contract.

As to the babble of the London world about a 'very young wife,' he scorned it completely, but it belonged to the calculation. 'A very handsome young wife,' would lay commands on a sexagenarian vigilance while adding to his physical glory. The latter he could forego among a people he despised. It would, however, be an annoyance to stand constantly hand upon sword-hilt. There was, besides, the conflict with his redoubtable sister. He had no dread of it, in contemplation of the necessity; he could crush his Charlotte. The objection was, that his Aminta should be pressing him to do it. Examine the situation at present. Aminta has all she needs—every luxury. Her title as Countess of Ormont is not denied. Her husband justly refuses to put foot into English society. She, choosing to go where she may be received, dissociates herself from him, and he does not complain. She does complain. There is a difference between the two.

He had always shunned the closer yoke with a woman because of these vexatious dissensions. For not only are women incapable of practising, they cannot comprehend magnanimity.

Lord Ormont's argumentative reverie to the above effect had been pursued over and over. He knew that the country which broke his military career and ridiculed his newspaper controversy was unforgiven by him. He did not reflect on the consequences of such an unpardoning spirit in its operation on his mind.

If he could but have passed the injury, he would ultimately—for his claims of service were admitted—have had employment of some kind. Inoccupation was poison to him; travel juggled with his malady of restlessness; really, a compression of the warrior's natural forces. His Aminta, pushed to it by the woman Pagnell, declined to help him in softening the virulence of the disease. She would not travel; she would fix in this London of theirs, and scheme to be hailed the accepted Countess of Ormont. She manoeuvred; she threw him on the veteran soldier's instinct, and it resulted spontaneously that he manoeuvred.

Hence their game of Pull, which occupied him a little, tickled him and amused. The watching of her pretty infantile tactics amused him too much to permit of a sidethought on the cruelty of the part he played. She had every luxury, more than her station by right of birth would have supplied.

But he was astonished to find that his Aminta proved herself clever, though she had now and then said something pointed. She was in awe of him: notwithstanding which, clearly she meant to win and pull him over. He did not dislike her for it; she might use her weapons to play her game; and that she should bewitch men—a man like Morsfield—was not wonderful. On the other hand, her conquest of Mrs. Lawrence Finchley scored tellingly: that was unaccountably queer. What did Mrs. Lawrence expect to gain? the sage lord asked. He had not known women devoid of a positive practical object of their own when they bestirred themselves to do a friendly deed.

Thanks to her conquest of Mrs. Lawrence, his Aminta was gaining ground—daily she made an advance; insomuch that he had heard of himself as harshly blamed in London for not having coun-

tenanced her recent and rather imprudent move. In other words, whenever she gave a violent tug at their game of Pull, he was expected to second it. But the world of these English is too monstrously stupid in what it expects, for any of its extravagances to be followed by interjections.

All the while he was trimming and rolling a field of armistice at Steignton, where they could discuss the terms he had a right to dictate, having yielded so far. Would she be satisfied with the rule of his ancestral hall, and the dispensing of hospitalities to the county? No, one may guess: no woman is ever satisfied. But she would have to relinquish her game, counting her good round half of the honours. Somewhat more, on the whole. Without beating, she certainly had accomplished the miracle of bending him. To time and a wife it is no disgrace for a man to bend. It is the form of submission of the bulrush to the wind, of courtesy in the cavalier to a lady.

'Oh, here you are, Rowsley,' Lady Charlotte exclaimed at the drawing room door. 'Well, and I don't like those Louis Quinze cabinets; and that modern French mantelpiece clock is hideous. You seem to furnish in downright contempt of the women you invite to sit in the room. Lord help the wretched woman playing hostess in such a pinchbeck bric-a-brac shop, if there were one! She 's spared, at all events.'

He stepped at slow march to one of the five windows. Lady Charlotte went to another near by. She called to Weyburn—

'We had a regatta on that water when Lord Ormont came of age. I took an oar in one of the boats, and we won a prize; and when I was landing I didn't stride enough to the spring-plank, and plumped in.'

Some labourers of the estate passed in front.

Lord Ormont gave out a broken laugh. 'See those fellows walk! That 's the raw material of the famous English infantry. They bend their knees five-and-forty degrees for every stride; and when you drill them out of that, they 're stiff as ramrods. I gymnasticized them in my regiment. I'd have challenged any French regiment to out-walk or out-jump us, or any crack Tyrolese Jagers to out-climb, though we were cavalry.'

'Yes, my lord, and exercised crack corps are wanted with us,' Weyburn replied. 'The English authorities are adverse to it, but it 's against nature—on the supposition that all Englishmen might enrol untrained in Caesar's pet legion. Virgil shows knowledge of men when he says of the row-boat straining in emulation, 'Possunt quia posse videntur.'

He talked on rapidly; he wondered that he did not hear Lady Charlotte exclaim at what she must be seeing. From the nearest avenue a lady had issued. She stood gazing at the house, erect—a gallant figure of a woman—one hand holding her parasol, the other at her hip. He knew her. She was a few paces ahead of Mrs. Pagnell, beside whom a gentleman walked.

The cry came: 'It's that man Morsfield! Who brings that man Morsfield here? He hunted me on the road; he seemed to be on the wrong scent. Who are those women? Rowsley, are your grounds open every day of the week? She threatens to come in!'

Lady Charlotte had noted that the foremost and younger of 'those women' understood how to walk and how to dress to her shape and colour. She inclined to think she was having to do with an intrepid foreign-bred minx.

Aminta had been addressed by one of her companions, and had hastened forward. It looked like the beginning of a run to enter the house.

Mrs. Pagnell ran after her. She ran cow-like.

The earl's gorge rose at the spectacle Charlotte was observing.

With Morsfield he could have settled accounts at any moment, despatching Aminta to her chamber for an hour. He had, though he was offended, an honourable guess that she had not of her free will travelled with the man and brought him into the grounds. It was the presence of the intolerable Pagnell under Charlotte's eyes which irritated him beyond the common anger he felt at Aminta's pursuit of him right into Steignton. His mouth locked. Lady Charlotte needed no speech from him for sign of the boiling; she was too wary to speak while that went on.

He said to Weyburn, loud enough for his Charlotte to hear. 'Do me the favour to go to the Countess of Ormont. Conduct her back to London. You will say it is my command. Inform Mr. Morsfield, with my compliments, I regret I have no weapons here. I understand him to complain of having to wait. I shall be in town three days from this date.'

'My lord,' said Mr. Weyburn; and actually he did mean to supplicate. He could imagine seeing Lord Ormont's eyebrows rising to alpine heights.

Lady Charlotte seized his arm.

'Go at once. Do as you are told. I'll have your portmanteau packed and sent after you – the phaeton's out in the yard – to Rowsley, or Ahead, or Dornton, wherever they put up. Now go, or we shall have hot work. Keep your head on, and go.'

He went, without bowing.

Lady Charlotte rang for the footman.

The earl and she watched the scene on the sward below the terrace.

Aminta listened to Weyburn. Evidently there was no expostulation.

But it was otherwise with Mrs. Pagnell. She flung wild arms of a semaphore signalling national events. She sprang before Aminta to stop her retreat, and stamped and gibbed, for sign that she would not be driven. She fell away to Mr. Morsfield, for simple hearing of her plaint. He appeared emphatic. There was a passage between him and Weyburn.

'I suspect you've more than your match in young Weyburn, Mr. Morsfield,' Lady Charlotte said, measuring them as they stood together. They turned at last.

'You shall drive back to town with me, Rowsley,' said the fighting dame.

She breathed no hint of her triumph.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SCENE ON THE ROAD BACK

After refusing to quit the grounds of Steignton, in spite of the proprietor, Mrs. Pagnell burst into an agitation to have them be at speed, that they might 'shake the dust of the place from the soles of their feet'; and she hurried past Aminta and Lord Ormont's insolent emissary, carrying Mr. Morsfield beside her, perforce of a series of imperiously-toned vacuous questions, to which he listened in rigid politeness, with the ejaculation steaming off from time to time, 'A scandal!'

He shot glances behind him.

Mrs. Pagnell was going too fast. She, however, would not hear of a halt, and she was his main apology for being present; he was excruciatingly attached to the horrid woman.

Wayburn spoke the commonplaces about regrets to Aminta.

'Believe me, it's long since I have been so happy,' she said.

She had come out of her stupefaction, and she wore no theatrical looks of cheerfulness.

'I regret that you should be dragged away. But, if you say you do not mind, it will be pleasant to me. I can excuse Lord Ormont's anger. I was ignorant of his presence here. I thought him in Paris. I supposed the place empty. I wished to see it once. I travelled as the niece of Mrs. Pagnell. She is a little infatuated. . . . Mr. Morsfield heard of our expedition through her. I changed the route. I was not in want of a defender. I could have defended myself in case of need. We slept at Ahead, two hours from Steignton. He and a friend accompanied us, not with my consent. Lord Ormont could not have been aware of that. These accidental circumstances happen. There may be pardonable intentions on all sides.'

She smiled. Her looks were open, and her voice light and spirited; though the natural dark rose-glow was absent from her olive cheeks.

Weyburn puzzled over the mystery of so volatile a treatment of a serious matter, on the part of a woman whose feelings he had reason to know were quick and deep. She might be acting, as women so cleverly do.

It could hardly be acting when she pointed to peeps of scenery, with a just eye for landscape.

'You leave us for Switzerland very soon?' she said.

'The Reversion I have been expecting has fallen in, besides my inheritance. My mother was not to see the school. But I shall not forget her counsels. I can now make my purchase of the house and buildings, and buy out my partner at the end of a year. My boys are jumping to start. I had last week a letter from Emile.'

'Dear little Emile!'

'You like him?'

'I could use a warmer word. He knew me when I was a girl.'

She wound the strings of his heart suddenly tense, and they sang to their quivering.

'You will let me hear of you, Mr. Weyburn?'

'I will write. Oh! certainly I will write, if I am told you are interested in our doings, Lady Ormont.'

'I will let you know that I am.'

'I shall be happy in writing full reports.'

'Every detail, I beg. All concerning the school. Help me to feel I am a boarder. I catch up an old sympathy I had for girls and boys. For boys! any boys! the dear monkey boys! cherub monkeys! They are so funny. I am sure I never have laughed as I did at Selina Collett's report, through her brother, of the way the boys tried to take to my name; and their sneezing at it, like a cat at a deceitful dish. "Aminta" — was that their way?'

'Something — the young rascals!'